

THE FARMING OF BONES

EDWIDGE DANTICAT

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PLOT OVERVIEW

The Farming of Bones, by Edwidge Danticat, was originally published in 1998. The novel's setting is the Dominican Republic and the surplus of the book takes place in the late 1930s. Amabelle Désir, orphan and servant to Señora Valencia and her father, Papi, finds herself going above and beyond the call of duty as she delivers Señora Valencia's twin babies. When the doctor arrives, he comments on Amabelle's stellar abilities as a midwife, and suggests she get a job as a midwife in her native Haiti. Before Amabelle can truly let this possibility sink in, Señor Pico, the twins' father, arrives and she has to return to her duties. While commiserating with some of the other workers, she finds out that Señor Pico has most likely killed a sugarcane worker on his way home that night.

Later that evening, Amabelle's lover, Sebastien, a sugarcane worker himself, returns to reveal that her colleague was correct: his friend, Joël, was struck and killed by a car earlier that evening. Sebastien then departs to help his roommate, Yves, as well as Joël's father, Kongo, care for the body.

With Joël's death weighing on Amabelle's mind, Amabelle receives another, far more urgent invitation to return to Haiti for work. The doctor warns Amabelle that danger is afoot and that she should leave not just to improve her status but to save her life. Amabelle, still unsure of the verity of the doctor's claims, explains what happened to Sebastien and invites him to come with her. He consents and invites his spitfire sister, Mimi, as well.

That evening, as Amabelle is tending to an overextended Señora Valencia, a fight breaks out in the street below Señora Valencia's home. The fight consists of Señor Pico and some military men on trucks threatening a group of Haitian cane workers carrying machetes. The military men verbally and physically abuse the cane workers, eventually driving off with them in the back of their trucks. Amabelle makes the final decision to flee after this incident, despite the fact that according to those present at the fight, Sebastien and Mimi have already been arrested for attempting to escape.

Amabelle ends up tracking down Yves and asking him to walk to Haiti with her, to see if there is any chance Sebastien and Mimi made it to the border. Through mountains and multiple attacks, Amabelle and Yves make it Haiti, although both are severely injured. Once they cross the border, they find out that they have just survived the systematic massacre of Haitians being carried out by the dictator of

the Dominican Republic. In Haiti, they find Yves' mother, as well as Sebastien and Mimi's mother, but no sign of Sebastien and Mimi. Their mother finally reveals to Amabelle that many people have reported seeing them killed. Amabelle lives with Yves and his mother for the next few decades, forever searching for Sebastien and even risking a return to Señora Valencia's in order to better remember the man she formerly knew.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND ANALYSES

Chapters 1-3

Chapter 1 Summary

It's 1937 in the Dominican Republic and lifelong servant Amabelle Désir suffers from nightmares about her parents' drowning. Sebastien Onius, a handsome sugarcane worker and Amabelle's lover, tries to soothe these nightmares. He tries to talk her out of her dream state and then tells Amabelle to strip so "you will know that you are fully awake and I can simply look at you and be happy" (2). Amabelle does this and he compliments her beauty. Her inner monologue does not match the scene, however. After the striptease, she says to herself, "It's either be in a nightmare or be nowhere at all" (2). She falls back asleep thinking about her father's warning about not playing with shadows when she was a child.

Chapter 2 Summary

Señora Valencia, Amabelle's wealthy childhood friend and her boss, goes into labor two months prematurely. Amabelle rushes to her side to help while they wait for Papi, her father, to get the doctor. Amabelle's parents specialized in "births and deaths," so she has some knowledge surrounding birthing procedures and is able to safely deliver what turns out to be twins, a boy and a girl, before the doctor ever arrives (5). The girl is both much smaller and darker than the boy. Señora Valencia names the daughter Rosalinda after her mother but tells Amabelle she is worried that because of Rosalinda's dark skin color she may be "mistaken for one of your people" (12).

Chapter 3 Summary

In the middle of the night, Amabelle and Sebastien are laying in the dark, talking to each other to keep from falling asleep. He asks questions about her mother and Amabelle reveals that her mother was a taciturn woman who rarely smiled. She says she respected her mother's "tranquility" (13). Amabelle explains that despite her mom always having a somber facial expression when she was alive, her mother is always smiling in Amabelle's nightmares.

Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The various weights that bog down Amabelle's life start to manifest in the first three chapters. On a personal level, Amabelle has suffered from the unexpected and premature death of her parents, a fact that haunts her unconscious mind and robs her of healthful sleep. Readers also learn that Amabelle is in a relationship with someone who, while kind to her, treats her like a child, and who sometimes can be a "shadow" on her life (4). On a societal level, Amabelle's race has burdened her as well. It's clear that Amabelle's race is the cause of her subservience to Señora Valencia and Papi. Even Sebastien's supposed compliment, that she "glow(s)," despite her skin color, reveals her to be a victim of racism. All of these issues compound to make Amabelle appear to be a somewhat insecure woman living in difficult conditions.

Chapters 4-6

Chapter 4 Summary

Doctor Javier arrives and helps with some of the post-birth care. He upsets Papi when he comments on Rosalinda's dark skin tone. In order to exit the tense situation, he has Amabelle make him a cafecito. When they are alone together, he asks more about her experiences with midwifery, noting her ability to deal with the caul and the "badly placed" umbilical cord (19). He urges her to take special care of Rosalinda, whom he is "anxious" about, and tells her that she should leave her job as a servant in the Dominican Republic and go work as a midwife in Haiti (18). After he disappears, another lifelong servant named Juana arrives and sobs with joy when she finds out about and then gets to meet the twins. Papi and Doctor Javier then exit the house, leaving Amabelle and Juana to care for Señora Valencia and the children.

Chapter 5 Summary

Sebastien wound up in the Dominican Republic after his father was killed by the 1930 hurricane in Haiti. Amabelle notes that it was ultimately a destructive force that brought them together. She reflects on his feeling of being "haunted" by pigeons (25) and his being bothered by their birds' cry.

Chapter 6 Summary

Señora Valencia tells Amabelle that she believes that the spirit of her mother was with her while she was in labor. She also tells her that she misses her husband, Pico, and wishes he didn't work quite so often. She says he aims to be president, but worries that if he accomplishes this, then he will leave her. After helping Señora Valencia with the children, Amabelle goes to find Juana and the stew she made for dinner. Amabelle and Juana talk about Juana's unfulfilled desire to be a mother, a miscarriage she had many years ago, and about the pain of being an ageing woman.

Chapters 4-6 Analysis

In Chapters 4-6, readers start to see some parallels between the characters. Sebastien, Amabelle, and Señora Valencia all have experienced the death of a parent and suffer greatly from their losses. For both Amabelle and Sebastien, that suffering manifests itself as trouble sleeping; for Señora Valencia, it manifests itself as a guilty conscience, leading her to make compulsory decisions, such as asking Amabelle to light a candle for her mother directly after she gives birth. The complexity of the characters deepens in this section as well. Sebastien, who initially serves the role of protector, is revealed to be a victim as well. His inability to remain in his home country, his dead father, and his phobia of the pigeons all expose a deeper layer of Sebastien. Additionally, Señora Valencia, who initially appears privileged and rude, has some intimate moments with Amabelle that prove she's a dynamic character. Amabelle's character is fleshed out as well, as she displays more agency in this section than in the previous three chapters. This can be seen when she starts to mull over the possibility of becoming a midwife instead of a household worker, a move that would ultimately change her position in the world.

Chapters 7-9

Chapter 7 Summary

The scene in this chapter parallels the scene in Chapter 3, with Amabelle and Sebastien talking in bed together at night, except this time he is asking about her father instead of her mother, and Amabelle is more reticent to reply. Amabelle says her father was "joyful" and playful in ways her mother was not (33). She then asks about his father and he reveals that as a young boy, he tried to carry his dead father as blood poured from his father's throat.

Chapter 8 Summary

Señor Pico Duarte, Señora Valencia's husband, arrives and runs with joy to his wife and newly-born children. He names the boy Rafael after the Generalissimo. Señor Pico then dismisses Juana and Amabelle so he can be with his family. Juana and Luis sit down to have dinner together and Luis reveals that on the way home, Señor Pico hit and killed a pedestrian with his vehicle. Before the conversation can further develop, Doctor Javier and his daughter, Señorita Beatriz, arrive to check on the newborn twins. Shortly after their arrival, Juana is asked to stay the night and Amabelle is sent home. Señor Pico tells Señora Valencia that he has a new assignment in the military, but Señora Valencia is less than pleased with this advancement, as she fears it means Señor Pico will spend even more time away from her. Before Amabelle leaves, Papi corroborates Luis's story and admits they may have killed a man and left him to die. At home, Amabelle reflects on her experiences playing in Henry I's citadel as a child. Her reverie is interrupted by Sebastien, who walks in bloody and grass-stained and tells her that his friend and colleague, Joël, has been hit and killed by a car. He explains that he is helping Joël's father, Kongo, make funeral arrangements. He leaves and Amabelle lays down to await his return.

Chapter 9 Summary

Amabelle describes the day her parents drowned. She was a child following them back from a shopping trip in Dajabon. They needed to cross over a river during a rainstorm. Despite her mother's warnings, her father insisted it was safe. He decided to carry her mother across and come back for Amabelle. Her parents were quickly swallowed in the current and killed. Amabelle screamed and tried to commit suicide but was pulled back from the water by some nearby boys who had earlier tried to save her parents.

Chapters 7-9 Analysis

In this section, several seeds are planted. On the one hand, resentment blooms in Amabelle. Her father's foolish bullheadedness, the "invisibil(ity)" her community asks her to retain, the hand-me-downs she inherits from Señora Valencia, and the way she sees her husband's friend discarded like trash because of his nationality all pump like poison through the protagonist, leading readers to wonder if and when she is going to become unhinged. The roots of nationalism also increase in figurative thematic volume in these chapters. What began as curt dialogue quickly

manifests into violence when Joël is hit and left for dead simply because he is Haitian, rather than Dominican. Additionally, Señor Pico does a lot to arouse readers' suspicions in this section. His physical and emotional distance, his condescending way of calming Señora Valencia's worries, his vehement dismissal of a dead man, and his militaristic views all push readers to question his potential for future evil. The reader leaves this section aware of several pressures accumulating on the page and sure something must come to a head soon.

Chapters 10-12

Chapter 10 Summary

Sebastien returns fully aware that Señor Pico killed his friend. He is full of rage and Amabelle worries he will attack Señor Pico, who has access to an arsenal of weapons. Sebastien says they cleaned Joël off in the river and then Kongo, Joël's father, carried the body off. He then adds that no one can find Kongo at the moment. Sebastien notices that Amabelle is sweating and she admits she had the nightmare about her parents drowning again. He urges her to imagine a different version of her life. He promises her that this is his last season working in the sugarcane fields, that he is sick of being considered "burnt crud at the bottom of the pot," and that they can invent a better life for themselves (56).

Chapter 11 Summary

Amabelle reflects on a painful fever she contracted as a child, possibly as a result of her parents' unscrupulous benevolence towards others in need. During this time, she believes she sees a doll her mother made her dancing and speaking to her, but her mother blames her fever for those hallucinations. Her parents tend to her illness and Amabelle regains her health.

Chapter 12 Summary

The morning after Joël is killed, Amabelle walks down to the stream where the workers bathe. They are quieter than usual. She sees Mimi, Sebastien's sister, and they discuss an upcoming party for Mimi's employer, Doña Eva, and the possibility of early death. Mimi says she would like to die young like Joël did. They see Kongo washing further down the stream and speculate on his sadness and anger. Mimi then urges Amabelle to move in with Sebastien so that Sebastien will no longer rely on Mimi for anything, allowing her to quit working for Doña Eva. Mimi loudly

proclaims that those around her should be “joyous” instead of somber, that Joël would want them to “be grateful he’s not here now” (65). At this outburst, Félice, Joël’s lover, exits the water. Amabelle chases after her. Félice states that she agrees with Mimi, saying they need to seek revenge against Señor Pico. Amabelle says they need to defer that decision to Joël’s father, Kongo.

Chapters 10-12 Analysis

In this section, the importance of the parent-child bond is brought to the fore. The connection is viewed as powerful even if not always positive. Amabelle’s relationship to her parents is fraught with frailties. Readers can see a connection between the scene in which her parents drown and the scene in which Amabelle has a fever—her parents often made decisions that put her at risk. She is haunted by their loss and it’s here readers can see the sheer strength of this connection. This bond is also reflected in the relationship between Kongo and Joël. Kongo’s determination to care for his son even in death shows the fortitude of the connection between them. Additionally, Amabelle’s insistence that Kongo make all the decisions regarding his son’s remains shows the reverence this community harbored for the parent-child bond.

Readers also see an emotional shift from complacency to indignance in these three chapters. Sebastien, who previously had remained calm, is moved to rage after he finds out who killed Joël. Mimi and Félice also reflect this rage as they react to their racist surroundings. This move towards anger, and the suggestion of “war” provides a foil to the muted responses of Luis and Amabelle earlier in the book, which in turn begins to change the tempo of the story (66).

Chapters 13-15

Chapter 13 Summary

Amabelle reveals that Sebastien talks in his sleep and sometimes has conversations with her. On one occasion, he tells her he wants to fly a kite with “a girl’s red satin ribbon for the tail” (67). She offers her red ribbon, but he only offers silence in return.

Chapter 14 Summary

Amabelle leaves the stream and starts fraternizing with some middle-class Haitians who all live in the same area. They start discussing a “rumor” that Haitians who are not “in one of the Yanki cane mills” will soon be sent back to Haiti (69). They mention that without documentation, it will not matter how long one has lived in the Dominican Republic; Haitians will be sent back to Haiti. This worries Amabelle, who has no “papers” proving her nationality (70). They then discuss Joël’s death in a manner that presents his death as a bad omen. A stonemason named Unèl suggests that “we gather together to protect ourselves” (71). Amabelle then watches as Unèl disappears into Don Gilbert and Doña Sabine’s lodgings, where she sees more workers than ever before. She makes one more stop on her way to work, visiting Father Romain. He’s flying a kite with some kids and gives her words of “hope” (74). At work, she watches Señorita Beatriz visit with Papi. Señorita Beatriz asks Papi several questions about his past and about whether he is happy living in the Dominican Republic. He says he doesn’t like it because of the way the military is glorified and has a monopoly on everything. He reveals that he is writing down his history but says he will only share the book with his grandchildren. Doctor Javier arrives and attempts to ask Amabelle if she would like to come to Haiti to work as a midwife soon. They are interrupted by the bustle of the house so she never answers, but in her head, Amabelle decides she will go if Sebastien agrees to go with her.

Chapter 15 Summary

Amabelle remembers her childhood desire to see what was cooking in her mother’s pot. She recalls opening the lid prematurely on one occasion and getting burned. She was saved by her father, who told her that at her age she “should not be” anywhere “near a pot” (83).

Chapters 13-15 Analysis

Foreshadowing is prominent in these chapters; while not much action takes place, the foundation for future action is being constructed. The seeds of change for Amabelle and Sebastien are sown; he wants to move on from sugarcane work, and she wants to move on from service work. Their angst is palpable, and it’s clear that something is going to push them out of their current complacency. That push, however, may not be of their own volition. Between the rumors about Haitians being returned to native soil, Papi’s concern over the invasive military state, and

the large number of workers suddenly present at Don Gilbert and Doña Sabine's, readers get the sense that there is a shift coming for the whole community, rather than just for the protagonists. Additionally, both of the flashbacks featured in this section have a hint of foreboding, with both the unaccepted bow and the burn on Amabelle's arm hinting at the way pain often arrives unexpectedly.

Chapters 16-18

Chapter 16 Summary

Amabelle brings Papi some water while he's working in his orchid garden. He starts talking about Señor Pico's accident again and Amabelle reveals that she knows which worker was killed. Papi asks Amabelle to put him in touch with the dead worker's father but Amabelle insists she get Kongo's permission first. Amabelle goes inside to check on Señora Valencia, who tells her that Señor Pico thinks the Generalissimo is going to give him "the whole nation" (86). They then discover that Rafi, Pico's son, isn't breathing. Señor Pico and Doctor Javier try to save him, but he's already dead. Señora Valencia puts him in her baptism outfit and paints his coffin with orchids. She asks Doctor Javier how Rafi died but his explanation is vague. While she is painting, she recalls the day her and Papi found Amabelle sitting on the rocks by herself. She says she was so grateful to have Amabelle come into her life, but Amabelle only feels jealousy at Señora Valencia's ability to touch things she can't. When mourners arrive, Señora Valencia refuses all visitors.

Chapter 17 Summary

Amabelle listens to hummingbirds "squawk [...] in fear" from her bedroom window (94). She gets naked and lays on the concrete floor, hoping she will sweat so much she will be too dehydrated to cry.

Chapter 18 Summary

Doña Eva's birthday party doubles as "Rafi's unofficial wake" (95). Amabelle notices that Señora Valencia's eyes look "dead" and other guests make similar remarks about Señor Pico's visage (95). It's clear Señor Pico wants to be alone with his son before he has to bury him. Papi turns on the radio and they listen to some clips from the Generalissimo's speeches. Everyone then shuffles out and Amabelle observes Señor Pico try to comfort a crying Señora Valencia. Amabelle believes that Señor Pico's "silence" is proof that his relationship to Señora Valencia is weak

(98). Señor Pico then announces that he will have to leave for work soon, to which Señora Valencia provides no response.

Chapters 16-18 Analysis

In this section, readers are fed pieces of larger narratives that beg to be fleshed out. There is a whirlwind of mystery around Pico. What is causing him to tell Señora Valencia that he believes he will receive the whole country from the Generalissimo? Does his desire to hold his dead son before he is buried make him empathetic, or does his ability to so quickly return to work belie his heartlessness? Why does Doctor Javier remain obtuse about Rafi's cause of death? Does he truly not know or is he trying to save Señora Valencia from something? All of these questions stir about, pulling readers further and further into the narrative on a string of anticipation.

Chapters 19-21

Chapter 19 Summary

Amabelle describes a cave behind a waterfall where she and Sebastien first “made love” (100). She says the cave stays light even when night has fallen. She wishes this impervious light will reach those who have recently died, as well as reach her parents.

Chapter 20 Summary

Despite several offers to help him, Señor Pico insists on digging his son's grave. Señora Valencia wants to join but Juana convinces her she needs to care for Rosalinda. Señora Valencia begs Juana to talk about Señora Valencia's mother and Juana concedes, describing her as a happy mother and, after some initial hesitancy, a happy wife. Amabelle leaves to go to Sebastien's and stops by Don Carlos's compound on the way, in order to try and speak with Kongo. Félice is sitting outside his lodgings and announces he will not let her in, but he allows Amabelle in. Kongo tells Amabelle how helpful Sebastien has been to him. She explains that Papi, Señora Valencia's father, wants to visit him and to pay for Joël's funeral but Kongo refuses. She goes to Sebastien's, where they tussle over Sebastien smiling at Rafi's death. He is angry that she is so defensive of the folks she works for and walks her back to stay the night with them. The next morning, Señor Pico leaves to bury Rafi. Señora Valencia helps to prepare him for burial but

stays at home to care for Rosalinda during the ceremony. While she is sitting on the verandah, she sees a group of cane workers walking by and asks Amabelle to invite them in. They're suspicious but based on Kongo's actions, a bunch of them follow Amabelle back to Señora Valencia's. She has Juana and Amabelle make them coffee and use her orchid-patterned tea set. Kongo separates from the group and approaches Señora Valencia. He tells her he understands her pain as he just lost a son, too. The cane workers then leave, knowing they could lose money if they don't come to work on time. When Señor Pico comes home and finds out about Señora Valencia's guests, he breaks all the orchid-patterned teacups.

Chapter 21 Summary

Amabelle recalls how her father used to make lanterns shaped like monuments for her. When she asked him to make a lantern of his face, he said that "It would be too vain [...] to spend more time than God reproducing oneself" (117).

Chapters 19-21 Analysis

This section highlights the fact that despite all of the characters living in the same location, they lead vastly different lives based on their social caste. The parallels, as well as the discrepancies, are pointed, especially between Kongo and Pico. Both men have lost their sons, although Kongo's connection to his son was much deeper (albeit Pico's son was an infant). Despite being closer, Kongo is forced to bury his son alone, without the typical trappings or ceremony, due to his social standing. Additionally, the community at-large does not react to Joël's death as anything more than another instance of nationalism, whereas the community comes in droves to honor the death of Rafi. Rafi is given a hand-painted casket, blankets, and a procession, whereas Joël is buried body to earth. Señor Pico also has a wife and daughter to fall back on, while Kongo has no one but himself. The inescapability of class cuts through this section and demands readers attention.

While Valencia would seem to desire being around people after the death of her child, Pico's response of learning that Haitian sugarcane workers have been in his house is to smash the cups they've used. Just like Pico, Rafi, the other male in the family, is absent from the domestic sphere, with Pico leaving to bury him. In Pico's patriarchal, nationalistic absence, we have a moment where the cane workers are treated as equals, and invited into a place they otherwise would not be.

Chapters 22-24

Chapter 22 Summary

Rosalinda is baptized. After she exits the church, Señora Valencia holds Rosalinda up for Amabelle to kiss, but Señor Pico yanks Señora Valencia and the baby away from Amabelle's touch. That night, Kongo visits Amabelle, bringing her a papier-mâché mask of Joël's face as an "offering" (120). She offers him food, which he accepts, and then begins talking about his past, telling Amabelle about his business selling masks and the love he has for his deceased wife. He then reveals that he is there to deliver Sebastien's marriage proposal. He says Sebastien doesn't want "to waste more time" after the incident at the ravine and explains he has come in lieu of Sebastien's dead father (122). He compares Amabelle to Félice, saying he wishes Joël found a woman like Amabelle, instead of Félice. Amabelle defends Félice, but to no avail. Before exiting, Kongo asks if Papi has asked to see him again. When he realizes he hasn't, he says he is "not surprised [...] my son has already vanished from his thoughts" (124).

Amabelle heads to see Sebastien but ends up being pursued by a small group of stonemasons who have formed a "brigade," in case any of the ruling class attempt to attack them at night. One of the stonemasons mentions that he is leaving before "talk turns to bloodshed" (125), but Unèl insists that he is going to "stay and fight" since he has done nothing wrong (126). Amabelle thinks they're being ridiculous, but they insist that "times have changed" (126). When she gets to Sebastien's, he and Yves bicker about what to do with some unused wood Papi had given Sebastien for Joël's coffin. Sebastien and Amabelle then lay down on his mat together. He shows her that Yves has been talking in his sleep ever since Joël's death. The next day, she reflects on how deep her love is for Sebastien.

Chapter 23 Summary

Amabelle has nightmares about both a sugar woman and her parents' death. The sugar woman wears a muzzle, which she tells Amabelle was put on to keep her from eating the sugarcane. She dances and teases Amabelle. Amabelle then reveals that Sebastien sometimes wearies of protecting her from her nightmares.

Chapter 24 Summary

On the morning of Señor Pico's departure, Señor Pico has Señora Valencia practice shooting a rifle. He insists that times have changed and even with Papi and Luis around, she needs to be able to defend herself. At one point, she almost accidentally shoots Amabelle. When Señor Pico leaves, he avoids Rosalinda, part of his growing aversion to his daughter. After he's gone, Papi seems skeptical of Señor Pico's military zest and mentions his feelings to Señora Valencia, who retorts that Señor Pico is "a good man" (138).

Chapters 22-24 Analysis

In these chapters, the spotlight is on the negative aspects of males. Even the male characters who have exhibited tenderness and insight thus far start to show their moral failings. Papi appears to have forgotten, or at least made a low priority, of making amends with Kongo over Joël's death. Sebastien reveals that he is sometimes annoyed by Amabelle's emotional needs. Kongo, who at almost every turn has appeared wise and loving, seems unjustifiably hateful towards his son's lover, Félice. However, more than any other male character, Señor Pico's true colors start to show. For most of the men in this book, their failures amount to a crack in an otherwise beautiful, if stressed, foundation, but for Señor Pico, the whole edifice appears to be evil. He shuns and ignores his only remaining (and female) child, he is violently and unabashedly racist, he shows little regard for human life, he is maniacal about his military standing, and he makes little to no effort to care about his wife.

Chapters 25-27

Chapter 25 Summary

Amabelle reveals her love for dust storms and says she likes to pretend there are people walking in front of her in the dust, people that will be there waiting for her when the dust clears. She imagines walking with her parents and compares the way she physically had to look up to them as a child to the way she looks up to the sky after the dust storm as an adult.

Chapter 26 Summary

Doctor Javier approaches Amabelle during a checkup for Rosalinda and says she must leave immediately, that she could be killed if she stays. He has two trucks ready and a plan to make it seem like they are headed to Mass, not Haiti. Amabelle is unsure if she can trust Señora Valencia to save her if she stays, so she packs and hides a bag just in case. Under the guise of searching for a missing Papi, Amabelle goes to Sebastien to tell him she thinks they should leave with Doctor Javier. He is angry with her for being too trusting of Papi, Señor Pico, and Señora Valencia. Sebastien says they should defer to Kongo about what to do. They walk over to where Kongo and Yves are sitting, and Kongo reveals that Papi had been to visit him earlier that morning. He had offered to put a cross with Joël's name on it on Joël's grave. Kongo refused, saying "no more crosses on my boy's back" (144). Ultimately, however, Kongo left the conversation feeling "understood" (145). This upsets Yves, who thinks it was a "masquerade" and that Kongo should have killed Papi (145). Sebastien then broaches the subject of leaving for Haiti. Yves says he is staying and, due to his age, Kongo says the same. Kongo blesses Sebastian and Amabelle and they prepare to return to Haiti.

Amabelle returns to Papi's house to find that Papi is still missing. Señora Valencia is sitting in the gallery watching for Papi when Señorita Beatriz shows up. Señorita Beatriz mentions Mimi leaving for the border, so Amabelle feigns surprise. Señorita Beatriz then also reveals that she doesn't like Señor Pico because of his rampant nationalism and narcissism. She expresses a want to "escape," whereas Señora Valencia announces that she "will never leave here" (151). They see some military vehicles speed by and rush down to the road to watch. The dust overcomes Señora Valencia and Amabelle notices blood on the back of Señora Valencia's dress. Señorita Beatriz and Amabelle help Señora Valencia back to bed, at which point Señora Valencia begs Amabelle to stay with her until she feels better. Amabelle refuses under the pretense that she needs to search for a "remedy" (152). Papi returns with a cross with Joël's name carved on it. An altercation then breaks out on the street below their house between the military and the cane workers. Señor Pico demands the cane workers kneel and renounce their weapons. As he's yelling, Doña Eva arrives and begs him to help release Doctor Javier, who has just been arrested. Señor Pico waves her off as the soldiers start to use the trucks to run over the cane workers. Amabelle tries to help one of the crushed workers; Señor Pico yells at her to get out of the way. She runs to the field where she hid her bag and watches as they seize and tie Unèl and throw him and

the remaining cane workers in the back of a truck. Señor Pico dismisses the trucks, which are now full of prisoners, and heads up to the house.

Amabelle sneaks through the cane to Kongo's, where he tells her Sebastien and Mimi were part of the group arrested at the church. He surmises that they are now either dead or in prison. Amabelle decides to go to the border by herself. Kongo gives her directions. Before she leaves, she goes to Don Gilbert and Doña Sabine's to talk to Yves. When she arrives, the house is empty of the guards and Haitians that bustled about there a few days before. Félice opens the door and asks about the altercation between the military men and the cane workers. Doña Sabine then yells at Félice for letting people in, stating that they have no idea who they can trust. Amabelle finds Yves and he agrees to join her on the escape to the border. They ask Félice to go but she refuses, saying she wants to watch over Kongo. They arm themselves and set out for Haiti.

Chapter 27 Summary

Amabelle and Yves hear an oxcart coming down the road and hide. The oxcart gets stuck and they watch from the bushes as the men try to get the cart moving again. While they are yelling at the oxen a disfigured female corpse falls out of the back of the cart and goes rolling down the hill by them. It's clear the men are killing Haitians unceremoniously at this point and Yves and Amabelle acknowledge their good luck in remaining alive. Later in the day, they run into a group of traveling Haitians. The travelers they meet tell horror stories of where they've come from and what they've survived. Amabelle meets another woman who is searching for her missing lover. One crippled traveler, Tibon, talks about how Haiti has "forsaken" them, forcing them to live in a country where they are unwanted (178).

Chapters 25-27 Analysis

In these chapters, some old suspicions are confirmed, and some new suspicions arise. Señor Pico, who has steadily been building a bad name for himself, proves to be the monster Sebastien has pegged him for all along. He verbally abuses the cane workers before having them attacked, and then moves on with his day as if violence and torture are just business as usual. Additionally, we see him show no remorse for those who have helped him along the way, and display revulsion rather than affection towards his child and wife. All his hints of emotional distance and war-crazy chatter come to fruition in these chapters.

While readers' worst fears are confirmed about Señor Pico, more questions than answers start to crop up around other characters. For example, Tibon mentions that Yves looks at Amabelle like Yves is her man—is there a chance that this stubborn and angry man could replace Sebastien if Sebastien can't be found or ends up dead? Readers also wonder if Señora Valencia is trustworthy and if she cares enough about Amabelle to keep her from being killed. Her constant affirmation that her husband is a “good man” attests to her naivete but not necessarily to her cruelty (150). Questions about Félice's loyalty to Joël and his family, along with questions about Juana and Luis's whereabouts, trickle into the narrative, which simultaneously harbors both possibility and grief.

Chapters 28-30

Chapter 28 Summary

The group stops for the night to sleep and one of the travelers, Wilner, makes the rules for what they can and cannot do in order to be safe. They see a fire down the mountain and can smell burning human flesh and decide it's time to move on. Wilner insists they go through the forest to the border and that a pair of Dominican sisters can no longer travel with them. The group acquiesces to his direction and moves on. At the foot of the mountain, they find an abandoned settlement that belongs to Haitian traders. At first, the group is excited thinking they have found protection, but Yves discovers several dead bodies hanging from nooses, so they keep going.

Chapter 29 Summary

The group arrives in the bustling city of Dajabon at night. They try to blend in but it doesn't work, and a group of men end up attacking them. Despite putting up a good fight, Tibon is killed. Yves and Amabelle are forced to kneel while several people shove their mouths full of parsley, making it almost impossible to breathe or think. All around them, people celebrate the Generalissimo's presence in the city, and Dominican pride in general. The crowd disperses when the Generalissimo leaves the church. Wilner and his partner, Odette, come to Amabelle's and Yves' aid, offering them a place to stay until they can cross the river tomorrow. They leave Tibon “face up” where he has been killed, which bothers Amabelle, but she doesn't have enough strength to fight against Odette's and Wilner's wishes that he be left behind (196). They escape to a small lodging Wilner has paid for. Almost as quickly as they arrive, they have to leave because someone comes to warn them of

approaching danger. They walk down to the river and decide to cross immediately. A soldier sees them and shoots Wilner. Odette is drowning so Amabelle grabs her and swims with her to shore, along with Yves. Odette dies when they arrive, her last word being *pesi*, the Haitian word for parsley.

Chapter 30 Summary

The next morning, Amabelle and Yves are found by a doctor and a priest who are attempting to help survivors and care for the dead. They have to leave Odette lying in a row of deceased Haitians. They wait in line to see a doctor with hundreds of other displaced and injured Haitians. When Amabelle is finally examined, they comment that she may die. She then has a dream of her mother “wearing a dress of glass” and “talking to her cheerfully” (208). Her mom tells her that her issues are in her head, not her body, and that “your mother was never as far from you as you supposed” (208). When she wakes up, she is surrounded by other survivors telling of all the horrific events they have witnessed and been a part of the past few days. They also complain about Haiti’s failure to protect them. Three days later, Amabelle wakes up to find out that she has been suffering from a fever and that Yves has been taking care of her. He says Mimi and Sebastien are still missing. Yves says he will take her to Sebastien’s mother’s house. The night before they are supposed to leave, she finds out that many of the injured are Dominicans, not Haitians, and just look Haitian.

Chapters 28-30 Analysis

In these chapters, the broader historical narrative overlaps extensively with the plight of the novel’s characters. Danticat illustrates the Dominican dictator’s 1939 massacre of Haitian immigrants, a horrific event that killed more than 9,000 people in roughly a week. The sanctity of life is nowhere to be seen here; corpses become part of the landscape. The violence and murder are both rampant and random, leaving Amabelle numb. While most of this section focuses on external drama, when Amabelle does take a moment to look inward, it is often with disgust for herself. She struggles heavily with her own sense of duty; in just a few days, she has gone from helping her fellow man to abandoning anyone who might endanger her. Additionally, Yves and Amabelle continue to grow closer in Sebastien’s absence, increasing the possibility that Amabelle may find herself in a new romance as she heads toward her native country.

Chapters 31-33

Chapter 31 Summary

After several days spent attempting to recover, Amabelle and Yves head to Cap Haitian and find Yves's mother, Man Rapadou. His mother mistakes Amabelle for Yves' lover; Yves quickly says not to jump to conclusions. His mom and his relations make him a feast to welcome him home, but Amabelle can only eat soup spoon-fed to her by Man Rapadou.

Chapter 32 Summary

Man Rapadou moves six kids out of Yves' old bed for Yves and Amabelle to sleep in. Amabelle lays down while Yves goes to talk to his mother. When Amabelle wakes up, Yves has gone to plant beans in his father's fields. Man Rapadou tells Amabelle that "[e]verything you knew before this slaughter is lost" (228). When Man Rapadou tells Yves to go visit Sebastien and Mimi's mom, Man Denise, he ignores her. Amabelle finds the house on her own but does not go inside, instead walking by the dwelling each day. She worries what Sebastien will think of her and wonders if he would even recognize her if he saw her.

Chapter 33 Summary

After several awkward nights sleeping next to Yves, Amabelle tries to talk to him when he lays down at night. She asks him if she can come to the fields with him, but he doesn't seem keen on the idea. Instead, he mentions that the Generalissimo is offering money to the families of those affected by the massacre. They go to the justice of the peace the next morning and wait in a line of more than 1,000 people hoping to share their stories in return for some compensation. By the end of the day, they still have not made it in. A woman who was able to get in tells the crowd that they are demanding papers as proof of the deceased, an impossibility for most. After 16 days of waiting, Man Denise shows up to wait with them. On that same day, they announce the money is gone and they cannot help anyone else. Many of those waiting rebel and storm the building. Amabelle, Yves, and Man Denise return to Man Denise's and several people come to console her. Yves leaves but Amabelle stays the night. The next day, she approaches Man Denise and tells her she knew Sebastien and Mimi. Man Denise responds excitedly, explaining that her children had left because the house had been taken from them, and that she always wondered if they knew that she had got it back. She then

insinuates that she knows Amabelle was Sebastien's lover and says she named him after Saint Sebastian because he was able to die two deaths. She then tells Amabelle that she has been told Mimi and Sebastien are dead, that they were forced to lie on the ground and then were shot to death from behind. She asks if Amabelle believes it and Amabelle says no but does, in fact, believe it. Man Denise then asks if Mimi and Sebastien wore the bracelets that she had made for them. Amabelle says they did. She then asks Amabelle to leave. After a small protest, Amabelle leaves and wanders about the town and then down to the harbor.

Chapters 31-33 Analysis

The case for a romantic relationship between Yves and Amabelle strengthens significantly in this section. Amabelle seems to be warming to the idea when she tries to have a conversation with Yves at night, a gesture reminiscent of the time she spent with Sebastien. Also, her worry that "lying next to Yves, I grew more and more frightened that Sebastien would not recognize me" can be applied to both her physical and mental selves (229). She not only worries that she looks physically different but that she is a different person based on her latest traumatic experiences. However, there is not much to worry about in that respect because, as this section demonstrates, Amabelle doesn't change much. Her experiences in the massacre and her parents' drowning both cause her to remain in a childlike state. After her parents drowned, she was forced to start completely over with a new family, and it appears a similar upheaval is at hand again. Starting over means starting from a position closer to that of a child than to that of an adult. Additionally, early on, readers saw Amabelle rely on Sebastien the way children rely on parents; after the massacre, scenes in which she is being spoon-fed and cared for seem to conjure this childlike dependency again.

Chapters 34-36

Chapter 34 Summary

Man Rapadou tells Amabelle that she knows the reason she is not with Yves is because of Sebastien. Yves comes home that night and tells Amabelle his beans have sprouted and that she should start sewing so they can both make money. They talk about Joël's death and how close Yves came to having been killed. Yves says Joël saved his life, but he has not been able to return the favor to anyone as he knows how much that favor can cost. He confirms Papi's story that Papi wanted to stay and look for Joël's body longer than Señor Pico would allow. They then try

to have sex, but Yves ends up crying. He goes outside to smoke, and Amabelle pretends to fall asleep.

Chapter 35 Summary

Amabelle tries to return to Man Denise's but Man Denise has left for good, in order to stay with family in Port-au-Prince. Amabelle tries to get more information from one of the girls still staying there but doesn't learn much. She then walks to Mass at a nearby church, where she is approached by another survivor who is working for the priests at that church. She puts Amabelle in contact with one of the priests who is known for listening to survivors' stories. When she talks to the priest, she says she doesn't want to share her story, but instead wants to find out if Father Romain and Father Vargas are still alive. The priest says yes, adding that they were recently released from prison, and directs her to where she can find Father Romain.

Chapter 36 Summary

Amabelle writes a note asking for confirmation of Mimi and Sebastien's deaths for Father Romain to give to Doctor Javier. The night before she leaves, Yves goes out of his way to avoid touching her. Amabelle tells him she plans on visiting Father Romain and Yves leaves her money to do so. She leaves the next morning only to pass out when she arrives. When she regains consciousness, she finds Father Romain's house. She is greeted by Romain's sister, who explains that Father Romain has had several visitors come whom he cannot remember, and that Amabelle should therefore not expect much. Father Romain does not remember her and instead mutters phrases he was forced to repeat while in prison. His sister explains the many ways he was tortured while imprisoned, including being fed nothing but his own urine. Amabelle leaves the letter for Doctor Javier with Father Romain's sister and returns home. She tells Yves about her visit to Father Romain, but he says he already knows everything she's telling him. She then tells him about Man Denise leaving and Sebastien and Mimi being dead, to which he responds, "I don't always tell you what I know or where I go" (263).

Chapters 34-36 Analysis

This section registers the wide-ranging and long-lasting effects of the massacre. From Father Romain's insanity to Man Denise's inability to ever see her children again, the physical and mental toll exacted by the violence and bloodshed will affect generations to come. This section also presents the idea that physical

location does not necessarily match mental location. For example, even though Father Romain is no longer physically imprisoned, he is still mentally imprisoned by the torture that he's endured. Man Denise leaves her home in an attempt to leave the sadness behind, but readers know that the fact that her children are dead will not be remedied by a move to a new place. Additionally, readers see that Amabelle and Yves are able to physically connect, but not emotionally. Danticat consistently employs this juxtaposition between physical space and mental space throughout the novel.

Chapters 37-39

Chapter 37 Summary

Amabelle is now haunted by dreams of giving her “testimony” (264). She says she knew all along that people were evil, but she did not want to believe they could be evil to her or that evil could live in the same house as her. She says the danger only became real when she found out Sebastien and Mimi had been killed. She thinks about the graves of all the people she has loved—graves that she will never be able to find—and then imagines her own grave. The river continues to dominate her thoughts.

Chapter 38 Summary

Amabelle grows old living with Man Rapadou and Yves. Yves and Amabelle remain distant and only talk when necessary. Twenty-four years after the massacre, the Generalissimo is killed, and Haiti breaks out in celebration. Amabelle joins in and even dances, much to Yves's consternation, as he does not think people should be happy about anything that involves so many deaths. They see Father Romain at the celebration, and he looks much better than when Amabelle last saw him. He has renounced the fatherhood and now has a wife and three kids. He says he will return to the Dominican Republic to help people from the town where Amabelle once lived.

Chapter 39 Summary

Amabelle describes the paranoia Yves experiences during the decades after the massacre. He has built up his family farm but remains a loner. One day, Man Rapadou comes to visit Amabelle in the rooms Yves has had built for her. She tells Amabelle that she always dreams she is falling, and that she is similar to Amabelle

because she has spent so much of her life dreaming. She reveals that she killed Yves's father because he was going to snitch on some fellow citizens, which would have led to widespread death. While Man Rapadou feels guilty about the murder, she says she could not let him inform on others. The morning after this discussion, Amabelle heads to Henry I's citadel and follows a tour. She listens as the tour guide explains Henry I's history of going from slave to king, and how he did so at great cost to others.

Chapters 37-39 Analysis

These chapters move the narrative forward roughly two-and-a-half decades and highlight the longevity of suffering and trauma brought about by armed conflict. Amabelle harbors disassociation from the drowning of her parents and what she witnessed during the massacre. She never connects to Yves or any other man. Both Yves and Amabelle find pleasure in menial tasks that don't require intellectual or emotional engagement so that they can remain distant from even their own minds. Man Rapadou's dreams about falling echo this distance as well. She says she falls further and further each night, mimicking the way Amabelle and Yves have had to move further and further from their pasts and their former selves each day. There is an inability in these characters to fully process the trauma of what they've seen and experienced; their collective loss becomes who they are.

Another point of interest in this section is the revelation Father Romain makes about religion. Throughout the novel, Amabelle has remained skeptical of the saints and religion in general. Her beliefs (or non-beliefs) seem to be confirmed when Father Romain says that rather than a love for God, "[i]t took a love closer to the earth, closer to my body, to stop my tears" (272), insinuating that religion alone is not enough of a foundation to save anyone.

Chapters 40-41

Chapter 40 Summary

Amabelle repeats Sebastien's name over and over again, invoking his memory. She imagines him caring for her beneath the waterfall where they first made love.

Chapter 41 Summary

Amabelle crosses secretly back over the border and into the Dominican Republic, paying someone to hide her in their Jeep. When she gets back to the Dominican Republic, she barely recognizes the place she once lived. After going to several incorrect addresses, she finds the place where Señora Valencia now lives. After some trouble being let in, she enters a beautiful, polished home filled with pictures of Rosalinda growing up. At first, Señora Valencia does not recognize Amabelle, saying that she was told by many that Amabelle was dead. Amabelle reveals enough intimate details about herself to convince her, and Señora Valencia then explains that she hid several Haitians during the massacre, always wishing they could have been Amabelle. They discuss Señor Pico's role in the massacre, which Señora Valencia writes off as him simply doing his duty. Señora Valencia then helps Amabelle find a nearby waterfall, but it's never made clear if this is the waterfall she went to with Sebastien. Amabelle then tells Señora Valencia she has to leave. Señora Valencia begs her to stay the night or come back but Amabelle will promise neither. On the way back, the driver tries to strike up conversation with Amabelle but she just wants him to let her out at the river. She takes off her clothes and climbs in; the only witness to this act is a man who has been deemed mentally insane.

Chapters 40-41 Analysis

The last two chapters consist of Amabelle trying to find closure. She looks everywhere in her past for answers: in her memories of her parents, in her memories of Sebastien, in Señora Valencia's home, at (perhaps) the waterfall where she made love to Sebastien, and while she does get some new information—such as Sebastien most likely would not have been killed if she had not asked him to go with her, as well as that that Señora Valencia and Señor Pico have grown very far apart—she does not find what she is looking for. Reminded by Señora Valencia that she always loved the water as a child, Amabelle goes to one more place from her past looking for answers: the river that killed her parents. Danticat ends Amabelle's journey on an ambiguous note, with the character "looking for the dawn" (310).

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Amabelle Désir

Amabelle Désir is a Haitian woman living in the Dominican Republic in the 1930s. Both her parents drowned, making her an orphan. She suffers from constant traumatic dreams. She was found by Señora Valencia and Papi, who took her home and provided her shelter and raised her to work as their help. She is loving and often childlike, and the people in her life rarely treat her as an equal.

Sebastien Onius

Sebastien Onius is a handsome, strong, sugarcane worker who is dating Amabelle Désir. His father was killed in a hurricane when he was a child and the memories of his dead father's body haunt him constantly. He does not trust the ruling class in the Dominican Republic. His love for Amabelle is palpable. He remains a loyal friend, lover, brother, and son throughout the novel.

Senora Valencia

Señora Valencia is a well-to-do woman who can be both compassionate and curt. When Amabelle and Valencia were children, she often balked societal norms and shared everything with her lower-class friend. Later in life, she talks down to Amabelle and expects her to be superhuman, but then dedicates years to trying to reconcile with Amabelle after the massacre. She does not approve of many of things Señor Pico, her husband, does, but she constantly glosses over his evil tendencies by stating he is a "good man" (138). She is a doting and loving mother who prefers to spend most of her time with her child instead of her husband.

Senor Pico Duarte

Señor Pico Duarte is Señora Valencia's inhumane husband who has "honey-almond skin" and a short stature (35). Throughout the novel, Pico proves that he is evil and selfish. He rarely treats his wife or daughter with respect. When he kills Joël by driving too fast on the way home to meet his children, he does not care enough to help the man he hit and does not appear to feel guilty about the incident at any point. The way he talks to the sugarcane workers, as well as the way he smashes the cups that the workers have used, demonstrates his xenophobia. His main mission in life appears to be to spread military-sanctioned violence.

Senora Rosalinda

Señora Rosalinda is Señora Valencia's highly-revered mother who dies attempting to give birth to Valencia's sibling. She is remembered as a kind and loving mother who treated everyone as equals.

Rafael

Rafael is Señora Valencia and Señor Pico's son, as well as Rosalinda Theresa's twin. He is born more robust and lighter skinned than Rosalinda; this, along with Rafi being male, aligns with him with both his father and Dominican nationalism. He dies shortly after birth; the act of his death is one of the novel's last major plot points prior to the massacre.

Rosalinda Theresa

Rosalinda Theresa is Señora Valencia and Señor Pico's daughter. She is named after Señora Valencia's mother. She is born darker and smaller than her twin. Despite others' anxiety about her ability to survive, she goes on to thrive.

Papi/Don Ignacio

Most often referred to as Papi, Don Ignacio is Señora Valencia's father. He is an exiled Spanish ex-pat who is obsessed with the Spanish Civil War. He is described as old, phlegmatic, and kind. He feels guilty about his role in Joël's death and is disgusted by his son-in-law, Pico, and the military state present in the Dominican Republic.

Irelle Pradelle

Irelle Pradelle is Amabelle's mother. She's known for being somber and conservative with her love. She drowned trying to cross the river with Amabelle's father when Amabelle was quite young. She often makes out-of-character appearances in Amabelle's dreams.

Antoine Désir

Antoine Désir is Amabelle's father. Amabelle remembers him as being jovial, sometimes to the point of excess. Amabelle cites his foolishness as the reason her

parents drowned. She often expresses resentment towards him for being too gratuitous with his love.

Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo

The Generalissimo is the head of the Dominican Republic during the 1930s, He is a hero to Señor Pico. He has a shrill voice and genocidal tendencies, having ordered the mass murder of thousands of Haitians. He ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961.

Kongo

Kongo is Joël's father, tasked with preparing and paying for his son's funeral after he is killed. He is referred to as "the most respected elder," and his advice consistently proves wise (62).

Yves

Yves is Sebastien's childhood friend and roommate who is present when Joël is killed and helps Sebastien and Kongo deal with the dead body. He has a huge Adam's apple and a shaved head. He is supportive of Sebastien and Amabelle's relationship and tries to help Amabelle find her lover and his best friend. He and Amabelle have a distant and awkward relationship though do remain together.

Unèl

Unèl is a stonemason. He is one of the middle-class Haitians living in the Dominican Republic at the time of the massacre. He is the initiator of the night-time brigade and unwilling to bend when Señor Pico threatens him. He ends up being killed by Señor Pico.

Father Romain

Father Romain is a young priest who is from the same place, Cap Haitien, as Amabelle. He starts out full of zest, but after his imprisonment, he temporarily loses his mind. By the end of the book, he has given up his priesthood and become a husband and dad.

Odette and Wilner

Odette escapes from a large mill with her lover, Wilner. She is part of the large group of Haitians traveling to the border that Amabelle and Yves end up joining. Odette ends up helping save their lives and dies while attempting to cross a river. Wilner's prudence makes him the leader of the group. He ends up getting shot and killed when they attempt to cross the river.

Tibon

Tibon is part of a large group of Haitians who are attempting to travel to the border. He has survived several attempts on his life by the time Amabelle meets him. He has one shriveled arm and one strong one. Amabelle grows close to him quickly. He is killed in Dajabon.

Man Rapadou

Man Rapadou is Yves's mother. She is a large, hairy, loving woman. She is very kind to Amabelle. She eventually reveals to Amabelle that she killed Yves's father because his role as an informant was going to get several others killed.

Man Denise

Man Denise is the mother of Sebastian and Mimi.

THEMES

Class as Equivalent to Identity

This novel showcases the tendency for class status to be the sole factor that defines one's existence, rather than a part of who one is. For Amabelle, being a servant was not something she did to make money, but a lifestyle she was committed to. Amabelle resents her invisibility and her duty to appear when needed and disappear when directed. She realizes that as a service worker, she will always be in the background of her own life. Readers see that she is expected to be at her employers' beck and call, night and day, ready to make a drink or birth a baby if necessary. When she is offered the position as midwife, she realizes that this would mean a complete change in the amount of power she has over her life and makes the declaration that "it was time to go on to another life, a life that would be fully" hers (80). Even though it's ostensibly only a career change, every aspect of her life would be different because it would remove her from the subservient class.

Class defines ability. Readers can see the stark contrast between those who are high class and those who are low class when the subject of leaving the Dominican Republic comes up. For people like Señorita Beatriz, who have established a fair amount of class status, leaving the Dominican Republic is a choice based on a want to seek pleasure. For people like Amabelle and Sebastian, leaving (or coming to) the Dominican Republic is not a choice but a grave necessity. This idea is hinted at again towards the end of the book, when Amabelle eavesdrops on a tour guide who says, "famous men never truly die [...] It is only those nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke" (280). This confirms that what is true in life will remain true in death: those who are poor will remain invisible even after they pass on.

Modesty

Throughout the novel, the importance of modesty, or lack thereof, comes up again and again. Amabelle is constantly sifting through nudity's potential for healing and for hurt. Señora Valencia is opposed to nudity. Even as she is giving birth and her body is literally being split open, she rages to be covered up, as if it is insulting to her to be exposed.

Amabelle's experiences with nudity differ. In the first chapter of the book, Sebastien asks her to strip, as if it will help her deal with her nightmares. He says,

“When you are uncovered, you will know that you are fully awake” (2). Later on, Amabelle remarks that “Sebastien has made me believe that it is like a prayer to lie unclothed the way one came out of the womb” (94). In the final scene of the novel, Amabelle gets naked and enters the river. This decision seems to let the reader know that Amabelle has accepted nudity into her life, rather than rejected it.

The Cost of Xenophobia

Characters throughout *The Farming of Bones* struggle with the xenophobic culture present in the Dominican Republic under the Generalissimo’s rule. They are robbed of a sense of belonging; unfamiliar with their native land, and unwelcome in the new one, many of them only find comfort in the presence of other victims of xenophobia. Regardless of the time their family has spent in the Dominican Republic, and regardless of their personal contributions, they are looked down on because their nationality is different from that of the dominant culture. As one Haitian points out, “To them we are always foreigners, even if our granmémés’ granmémés were born in this country” (69).

In order to cope with this, the Haitian immigrants learn to get together and talk. As one Haitian immigrant points out, “It was a way of being joined to your old life through the presence of another person” (73). For Amabelle, this sense of belonging pressed against her two-fold because she was both a literal orphan with no family, and an orphan separated from her home country. Beyond the isolating experience xenophobia created for Haitian immigrants, it also eventually manifested into violence and death.

SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

Shadows

Amabelle is surrounded by and discusses shadows throughout the novel. The first reference comes when she is recalling her father's warning to her not to play with shadows. Shadows, being visually dark but not tangible, seem to represent suggestions of danger, rather than actual danger. For example, the shadows that Sebastian helps her fight are just dreams, representations of danger but not danger itself. During one of the dreams about her mother, her mom refers to Amabelle as her shadow. This tugs on the idea that Amabelle may create some of her own shadows, that they are not all forced on her externally. Amabelle eventually concludes that all her ancestors are shadows—dark spots on the horizon that disappear as soon as she reaches for them.

Kites

The symbol of the kite makes three significant appearances in the book. The first instance takes place when Sebastien is talking in his sleep. He tells Amabelle that he would like to fly a kite, but when she offers her red ribbon for him to fly it, he never responds. The next instance takes place when Amabelle visits Father Romain, hoping he will calm her fears about the possibility of an attack on the Haitians. When she arrives, he is helping some small school children fly a kite. The kite appears again post-massacre when Amabelle visits a mentally disturbed Father Romain. He is attempting to fly a kite, except this time there are no joyous children to join in the fun. The kite's ability to fly while remaining grounded is what makes it such an important symbol in this book: both Father Romain and Sebastian are trying to lead better lives without losing sight of their roots.

Leaves

Leaves are connected to luck in the novel. They are initially used by Amabelle's parents to help deliver babies. Later on, readers see them pinned to Doctor Javier's jacket in an attempt to bring luck to himself. Furthermore, when the cane is ready to harvest, the leaves are burned, leading to a very unlucky harvest for both workers and owners.

Parsley

Parsley is used by the Generalissimo as a litmus test for finding out who is Dominican and who is Haitian. The word for parsley in Spanish requires a trilled r that those who speak Haitian Creole cannot pronounce. When faced with whether or not to kill someone, soldiers asked the potential victim to say the word parsley and the pronunciation would determine their fate. In the book, Amabelle and Yves have their mouths filled with parsley over and over. This is a more intense way of showing the potential parsley has to hurt them. Parsley, which usually is added to a dish for its health benefits, and “to cleanse,” is robbed of its intended use and in excess is used to soil rather than sanitize characters in the novel (202).

IMPORTANT QUOTES

1. “You are glowing like a Christmas lantern, even with this skin that is the color of driftwood ashes in the rain.” (Chapter 1, Page 1)

Sebastien intends this as compliment to Amabelle, but it also lets readers know that her skin color and her nationality may be an impediment or burden in the future.

2. “When he’s not there, I’m afraid I know no one and no one knows me.” (Chapter 1, Page 2)

This is part of Amabelle’s internal dialogue. It reveals the dependent nature of her relationship to Sebastien, one in which she often takes on the role of a child.

3. “I had to calm her, to help her, as she had always counted on me to do, as her father had always counted on me to do.” (Chapter 2, Page 7)

Amabelle makes this comment about Señora Valencia and her father, Papi. In this comment, readers can sense both the subservient role she plays in these relationships, as well as the resentment she harbors towards them.

4. “I will not have my baby like this [...] I will not permit anyone to walk in and see me bare, naked.” (Chapter 2, Page 8)

This comment is made by Señora Valencia. It touches on two major themes in this book. First, readers see the beginning of a book-long discussion about the potential of nudity for both joy and shame. Secondly, readers can see in this statement that in the world of this book, class often dictates action; for the wealthy Dominicans, being seen naked is more often a choice than it is for the poorer Haitians.

5. “Amabelle do you think my daughter will always be the color she is now [...] My poor love, what if she’s mistaken for one of your people?” (Chapter 2, Page 12)

This comment is made by Señora Valencia to Amabelle. It reveals Señora Valencia’s tendency to be condescending to Amabelle and her disregard for

Amabelle's feelings. It also lets readers know that skin color is related to how one will be treated in the novel.

6. "Many people who consider themselves clever found pleasure in frightening the household workers with marvelous tales of the outside world, a world they supposed we would never see for ourselves." (Chapter 2, Page 19)

This quote shows that for Amabelle and the society she lives in, household worker is considered an identity, not a job. The quote also reveals that the upper class actively work to keep the upper hand, flaunting their intelligence and refusing to share it except to mock those below them.

7. "I was always very jealous of the time he spent on other people's land." (Chapter 7, Page 34)

Amabelle says this about her deceased father. This quote shows readers that Amabelle harbors resentment towards her father. It also teases a question that comes up again and again in this novel: how much can one help others without hurting oneself?

8. "Working for others, you learn to be present and invisible at the same time." (Chapter 8, Page 35)

Amabelle has this thought as she is running errands for Señor Pico. It provides insight into the self-effacement she has learned and why she sometimes remains childlike in nature, having never had much power to exert.

9. "(E)verything I had was something Señora Valencia had once owned and no longer wanted. Everything except Sebastien." (Chapter 8, Page 45)

When Amabelle has this thought, her resentment towards her diminished role in life and towards Señora Valencia is confirmed. Readers can also confirm Amabelle's dependency on Sebastien for happiness and identity in this passage.

10. "Do you think you and I will live long enough to be as old as Doña Eva?" (Chapter 12, Page 60)

When Amabelle asks this question to Mimi, she is highlighting how vicious life as a Haitian can be. It shows readers how Haitian people were forced to live in fear, in non-nourishing conditions, and were forced to accept a lower life expectancy.

11. “If our men had killed Kongo’s son, they’d expect to die [...] But since it’s one of them, there’s nothing we can do.” (Chapter 12, Page 63)

This quote, spoken by Mimi to Amabelle, displays the stronghold nationalism had on the Dominican Republic during the 1930s. Even murder was not enough to incite justice or empathy, and Haitians’ lives were attributed less worth.

12. “This must be what it means to get old...I could hate no one when I was young. Now I can and I do.” (Chapter 12, Page 65)

Throughout the novel, Amabelle searches for what it means to grow old. This bit of dialogue from Félice provides some insight into that quest. It also reveals how Félice was deeply impacted by Joël’s death.

13. “We cannot start a war here.” (Chapter 12, Page 66)

This is Amabelle’s response to Félice’s urging that something be done “to teach them that our lives are precious too” (66). It hints at the broad implications of seeking revenge for Joël’s death. Both Amabelle and Félice know that any such action would have a ripple effect on the whole community. Amabelle predicts that a justified retort on their part will lead to widescale violence on the part of the Dominicans.

14. “(R)emembering—though sometimes painful—can make you strong.” (Chapter 14, Page 73)

This quote is in reference to Father Romain’s sermons. Amabelle and Sebastien often force each other to remember their pasts. This line demonstrates why they push each other to reflect on their unpleasant pasts.

15. “Soon you will have to be near a pot every day [...] For now you don’t have to be.” (Chapter 15, Page 83)

Amabelle's father says this to Amabelle after she has burned herself opening her mom's cooking pot. This quote gives readers a sense of the servile role Amabelle has been trapped in from the beginning. Her life as a household worker was considered her fate, be it cooking for the more affluent or in her assumed role as a wife, and, as such, responsible for domestic chores like cooking.

16. "I think only his son knew his true name." (Chapter 16, Page 86)

The quote accents the novel's take on parent-child relationships as the most powerful relationships humans enter into. In this case, the idea is that only a child is capable of knowing a parent's true identity. Further, it speaks to Haitian identity, and the freedom prior generations of Haitians won via a prolonged slave revolt against the French. Joel, who essentially worked as an indentured servant for wealthy Dominicans, and then was killed by one, represents a generation of Haitians who have had that freedom wrested from them by the Trujillo regime.

17. "[H]e asked you who you belonged to. You pointed to your chest and said, yourself." (Chapter 16, Page 91)

In this quote, Señora Valencia is recounting how Papi reacted when they saw Amabelle sitting by herself on the rocks as a child. The idea that Amabelle once belonged to herself instead of to others helps readers understand how painful her experience as a service worker has been, and also shows how Danticat uses the character of Amabelle—in addition to many other Haitian characters—to represent a freedom that Haitians have lost.

18. "Tell him I am a man [...] He was a man, too, my son." (Chapter 20, Page 109)

Kongo says this to Papi in response to Papi's request to visit him and pay for his son's funeral. It's clear from this quote that Kongo has not only lost his son, but his pride. Papi's offer does not assuage, but rather accents, how little control Kongo had over his son's life and his own life, making it seem as if he is not capable of properly caring for his child.

19. "It would be too vain [...] to spend more time than God reproducing oneself." (Chapter 21, Page 117)

Spoken by Amabelle's father, this quote proves that there are distinctly different expectations for fathers and mothers in this community. Women, like Señora Valencia, are expected to spend all their time reproducing themselves, whereas for men this occupation is looked down on.

20. "The Dominicans needed the sugar from the cane for their cafecitos and dulce de leche." (Chapter 26, Page 140)

This thought of Amabelle's proves that she has internalized the poor self-worth that has been placed on her. The only value she thinks she offers is the ability to sweeten what others already have.

21. "Things are never even." (Chapter 26, Page 144)

This bit of dialogue from Kongo boils the book down to one sentence. While there are external parallels between the characters, such as all living in the same location, or nearly all having lost a parent, their experiences are vastly different based on their gender and sociocultural roles.

22. "I was surprised I could yield so fast and leave them behind." (Chapter 28, Page 183)

Amabelle thinks this to herself after abandoning the Dominican sisters on the trip to the border. Fear, like readers see with the hummingbirds earlier in the book, becomes a main motivator in Amabelle's world; her own value system is necessarily subverted by her need to survive.

23. "All I had wanted was for her to be still." (Chapter 30, Page 205)

This thought of Amabelle's hints to the reader that Amabelle thinks she may have killed Odette before the water was able to. This is especially significant since her parents died crossing a river as well. It's as if she needed to have some control over the crossing this time, and, even so, still failed.

24. "Leave me now...I'm going to dream up my children." (Chapter 33, Page 243)

Spoken by Man Denise after revealing to Amabelle that Sebastien and Mimi are dead, this quote stands in stark contrast to the earlier parts of the book, in which Sebastien and Amabelle always tried to avoid their dreams

because of the pain they caused. Here, readers see the foil to that, as Man Denise uses her dreams as a means of safety and happiness.

25. "I wish the sun had set on my days when I was still a young, happy woman."
(Chapter 39, Page 277)

Man Rapadou confesses this to Amabelle, mirroring Mimi's wish earlier on in the novel to die young. The reader might also view Haiti's independence, gained in the early 19th century, as that nation's moment of being young and happy. By the end of the novel, Rapadou, similarly to the collective consciousness of so many Haitians, has aged and lost its joyfulness.

ESSAY TOPICS

1. Why are some chapters in bold and some in regular font? What is the purpose of this in relation to the narrative?
2. Why is Amabelle reticent to reply to Sebastien when he asks about her father in Chapter 7?
3. Amabelle says, “There are times when I want to be a girl again, to touch this doll, because when I touch it, I feel nearer to my mother than when her flesh is stroking mine” (57). Why might touching the doll make her feel a more intimate connection to her mother than touching her mother would?
4. Why are Juana and Amabelle willing to sleep in the same house as “the dead child,” but not Sebastien (104)? In what ways are men and women in this novel expected to act differently in regard to death?
5. Why does Kongo dislike Félice so much?
6. Why do the chapters lengthen towards the second half of the novel? How does this change in chapter structure speak to other elements of the book, such as plot and theme?
7. Why does Henry I’s Citadel play such an important role in Amabelle’s imagination and life? How does Henry I’s narrative parallel Amabelle’s?
8. What is the significance of Amabelle’s dream about the sugar woman in Chapter 23?
9. Discuss the significance of the novel’s title.
10. Does the ending image intimate that Amabelle committed suicide or that she is committed to hope? Why does Danticat choose to leave Amabelle’s fate ambiguous?